
BIRDS OF A FEATHER

A NOVEL

BY

JOHN GILBERT

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A FARMER placed nets on his newly-sown plowlands and caught a number of Cranes, which came to pick up his seed. With them he trapped a Stork that had fractured his leg in the net. The Stork earnestly beseeched the Farmer to spare his life.

"Pity me," he said, "and let me go. I am no Crane; I am a Stork, a bird of excellent character. Look at my feathers---they are not the least like those of a Crane."

The Farmer laughed.

"That may well be," he said. "But the fact remains, I've caught you with these robbers, the Cranes, and you must die in their company."

It all began with this unexpected, impromptu visit. By what had to be BIRDS OF A FEATHER the weirdest cretin who ever walked through our office door. The kind of guy who was such a "bad act" and so thoroughly annoying that you immediately wanted to take out a can of disinfectant and spray him with it. I thought you found guys BIRDS OF A FEATHER like this

only in Grade B gangster pictures. Or in old cartoons. In fact, from the moment he walked in, and started flinging that stringy, greasy hair of his, he right away reminded me and my partner Max of some character out of Looney Tunes.

I mean, this guy was definitely straight out of the animation department at Warner Brothers. He even had a lisp, and as I took a few moments to take him in, I realized he reminded me of Daffy Duck. Even the way BIRDS OF A FEATHER he presented and introduced himself was like Daffy, bobbing into our office all cocksure of himself, wildly glancing around, and immediately making himself at home in such an overbearing and annoying manner that, again, we wanted to spray him, or swat him like some fly.

Instead, we took a few moments to digest his presence and the almost cartoon-like grace with which he slithered in, announcing that his name was Mel as he pulled up a chair, sat down, and then told us that BIRDS OF A FEATHER he had a job BIRDS OF A FEATHER for us that was “special”.

“Special?” I asked, looking over at Max.

“Special,” Mel nodded, BIRDS OF A FEATHER glancing about the room confidently, flinging his greasy hair. _

“What’s ‘special’?” Max promptly demanded.

There was a momentary pause as Mel collected himself, rode the silence he was offering and exploited it with great suspense. Then he bobbed his wide eyes, first at me, then at my partner.

“Special is ‘special’,” he finally said.

“Obviously,” I stated. “But we’re not gonna know BIRDS OF A FEATHER what ‘special’ is until you tell us.”

He nodded in confirmation, pursed his big blubbery lips. We couldn’t help but give him the once-over again.

The guy was long, lanky, and apparently double-jointed, and gave us the impression that he could be tied up in knots. Or compressed into a ball that we could bounce and play hoops with. Despite the fact that he checked in at almost six feet, he didn’t give you the impression that he was tall, probably because his body, being as gangly as it was, had a tendency to betray its stature and slump over. He was imposing, true, but the only thing imposing about him was the fact that he was so hilarious looking. The billiard ball eyes that looked as if they didn’t fit in his head, and the blubbery lips that looked as if he inflated them every morning with air from a bicycle pump. Then BIRDS OF A FEATHER the BIRDS OF A FEATHER hair, black stringy, and that looked as if he dyed it with shoe polish. What reminded us both about Daffy BIRDS OF A FEATHER Duck was BIRDS OF A FEATHER the way he not only moved but shifted his torso, almost as if he were the carriage on a typewriter, everything from the waist up moving to the right or left as his hips would remain stationery. The more I think back on it, this character

would have made a fortune in some circus, which was reinforced now as, spitting saliva as he enunciated, he told us: “I need you guys to attend to a matter that’s well, slightly irregular.”

“Irregular?” I asked.

“Irregular.” Mel said.

“You mean irregular *and* special,” Max supplied by way of finality.

Mel offered a bold, cocksure nod.

“Yeah. Something that private dicks don’t usually or, say, normally, what’s the word, ‘frequently’ do. Yeah, that’s it. ‘Frequently’.”

I looked up at my partner. We both smiled. The BIRDS OF A FEATHER odd, almost staccato style in which Mel’s brain was working and blurting this out had us in full entertainment mode. We weren’t sure whether this was one of many pranks often paid on us by associates, or whether this guy was BIRDS OF A FEATHER simply a straight loony who’d sauntered in. The fact of the matter, in this business and our line of work, you’d be surprised the kind of nut cases who show up. We’re used to almost anything. Most recently we had even been hired by someone who wanted us to investigate all the flying saucers that were supposedly busy landing in his backyard.

“So, what’s this thing, this ‘assignment’ that’d be so ‘irregular’?” I asked.

“And infrequent?” Max added, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Poor Max looked really worse for the wear that day, as usual, because he was spending all his evening hours hiding from his wife in a neighborhood bar. Maybe it was that BIRDS OF A FEATHER and the way Max was built, big, stocky, and bear-like, that always turned him into the disagreeable, “bad cop” member of the team. I usually did the talking. He usually did the muscle work. Not that we didn’t trade roles, but it was just the way things usually worked when we operated together. Mel had apparently picked up on this, for he eyed Max cautiously for a moment, then returned his gaze for safety’s BIRDS OF A FEATHER sake my way. And he began tapping the end of the chair BIRDS OF A FEATHER with his long, bony fingers. Already he was irritating me.

“How should I say it, put it...?” he said. “‘*Special*’ is, well, something that guys like you, private eyes, wouldn’t normally attend to. Something that, well, needs to be done and that could be difficult. Are you interested?”

Max eyed him grimly from over his coffee.

“How can we be? We don’t know what the fuck BIRDS OF A FEATHER you’re talking about.”

“Yes,” I stated, “why not get to the point.”

Squirming around in his chair, betraying a certain awkwardness for the first time, Mel sat up slightly, came forward and then, glancing first at my partner, then at me, whispered: “I thought you guys would know.”

Now, at this point, as I made quick eye contact with Max, we both knew that this guy was possible trouble, and had, in all probability, been referred to us by people who usually use buffers when they wanted our “special” services. All at once our detective skills were going at full pace as we stared and studied Mel’s Looney Tune persona. Funny as he was, this guy was a Grade-A sleaze. I didn’t rule out the possibility that this Mel had rubbed shoulders with some of the wise guys we knew and that he could even be some kind of stooge, mob errand boy, somebody the crews use to do shit work. Feeling I had made him squirm enough, I came forward, and after another rapid fire confirming look at my BIRDS OF A FEATHER partner, got down to BIRDS OF A FEATHER business.

“Why don’t you get BIRDS OF A FEATHER to the point and tell us what ‘special’ means,” I said.

Again there was the rapid-fire fling of BIRDS OF A FEATHER the stringy, dandruff colonized hair, Mel nervously arching his otherwise slithery spine. And then he quickly blurted: “Life Insurance.”

Max and I both stirred now. Stirred for real. And the red alert promptly went off in our heads. Now we were becoming really uneasy, and realized that this was most likely some rude and unhealthy kind of joke that some wiseass mobster had probably put Mel up to. I came forward, took out a cigarette, aimed it at Mel.

“Who sent you here?” I asked him.

“Nobody,” Mel grunted, his eyes nervously bobbing about the room before they fixed, however briefly, back my way.

“Nobody?” Max grunted.

“Yeah, nobody.”

“You just found us BIRDS OF A FEATHER out of the fucking blue?” I asked.

“In the Yellow Pages,” Mel said. “Hence ‘nobody’.”

It was at this point that Max leaned forward, nudged him.

“You being funny?”

Mel squirmed uncomfortably, his wiseass façade swiftly self-destructing as he inched away

from the poke.

“No. Why BIRDS OF A FEATHER would I wanna be funny?”

“You tell us,” I stated, sitting back, firing up the BIRDS OF A FEATHER smoke as I examined him. “You come in here, without an appointment, tell us cryptically that BIRDS OF A FEATHER you have something ‘special’ for us to do, then you tell us it’s life insurance.”

Mel’s face started registering confusion now. “You do handle life insurance policies, though, don’t you?”

“No,” Max growled. “We’re a detective agency. We hunt down cheating wives and husbands. That kind of thing.”

“Well maybe I got my terms wrong,” Mel stated evasively.

“Maybe you better tell us who fucking sent you here,” BIRDS OF A FEATHER Max insisted, nudging Mel in the arm once more.

“I told you,” Mel stated, defensively rubbing his arm, “I found you guys in the Yellow Pages. And I don’t see what you guys are getting so upset about, my mentioning life insurance.”

Max loomed over him grimly now.

“Since when do private investigation services handle life insurance policies?” he demanded.

“Look,” Mel stated, beginning to panic, “all I was told was that I could walk in here, lay the cards on the table, about a job, BIRDS OF A FEATHER about life insurance.”

“You were told’....?” I said. “Then you didn’t just find us in the Yellow Pages...”

He waved his hands as if to say “yes” and “no”.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

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